

The Buffalo of Buffalo National Park,
Wainwright, Alberta.

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This balance was upset with the coming of the white man with his fire-arms and his links with far-distant markets. An era of destruction on a vast scale started, and both whites and Indians found a livelihood in supplying the commercial demand for hides and meat. No less a contributing factor may have been the belief that dispersal of the buffalo might keep the Plains Indian from his nomadic life.

To the early settler and trader the herds of buffalo must have appeared almost inexhaustible. It is said that individual hunters killed from 1,000 to 3,000 buffalo in a season. This picture was soon to change. The words of (Sir) Stafford Flowering, written in 1883, now read like a funeral oration:

"We were told that at one time this valley, with the country around Norley and Calgary, was the haunt of the buffalo."

CANADIAN WILDLIFE SERVICE

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The buffalo, in its natural state, once ranged in vast herds over the grasslands of the interior of North America and through the more open parts of the adjoining forest regions. In intimate association was the Plains Indian, for whom it provided food, clothing, shelter, and fuel. The relationship, however, was a balanced one, as the primitive economy and simple weapons of the hunters made no greater demands on the herds than their annual increase could supply.

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Mr. David Macdougall tells us that he has seen the ground black with them, and that from an eminence not far from Morley he has beheld them in herds on the plains, the number of which would not be less than a million."

By the turn of the century there probably was not a single buffalo roaming the plains of Canada in wild state. A few scattered animals may have persisted in the upper Peace River Valley, and there were one or two small groups of plains buffalo in captivity. At the same time, far to the north in the vicinity of Great Slave Lake was an isolated herd of the wood buffalo, a different subspecies.

Fortunately, through the foresight of the Government of Canada, an opportunity was afforded to re-establish the plains buffalo in Canada by the acquisition of most of the only remaining large herd on the continent.

The story of this herd is well worth recording in some detail. Its origin dates back to 1873 or '74 when an Indian, Walking Coyote by name, captured four young calves on the Milk River near the International Boundary. The calves were taken to the Flathead Reservation in Montana and treated as pets around the St. Ignatius Mission. By 1884 the original four had become thirteen. That same year ten of these animals were purchased by Messrs. Allard and Pablo, two ranchers who lived on the reservation, and who realized that investment in a near-extinct animal might turn out to be profitable. In 1893 they added twenty-six more animals to their holdings from the "Buffalo" Jones herd at Omaha. This herd, although derived mainly from wild Texas stock, also contained animals procured from Colonel Bedson, of Stony Mountain, Manitoba, originally collected in the 1870's. On the death of Allard in 1896, a half share of the herd, then about 300 head, went to his estate and was divided equally amongst his heirs. These animals were sold and provided the nuclei of the majority of the existing herds in the United States today.

Through the demands of settlement of the range country comprising the remaining Pablo holdings, the original buffalo herd became faced with dispersion and destruction. The Canadian Government, realizing the potential tragedy involved, offered to purchase the greater portion of the herd and move it to a suitable habitat in Canada. Added interest was given to the transaction by the fact that the herd contained the descendants of the Canadian animals from Stony Mountain, Manitoba, if not some of the original stock.

In 1906 negotiations conducted through the office of the Minister of the Interior were successful; and, after many difficulties were overcome in the round-up and shipment, 716 head of buffalo were brought north safely to Canada during the years 1907 to 1912.

The first buffalo reserve in Canada was established at Elk Island National Park, situated a short distance east of Edmonton. The first shipments of buffalo from Montana were sent to this Park, but later shipments went directly to the newly created Buffalo National Park at Wainwright. Subsequently, all but 48 animals at Elk Island were transferred to the new Buffalo Park at Wainwright.

The response of the herd to its new environment was most gratifying, but the increase in numbers resulted in problems in wildlife management. Of these, two were of major importance.

The first was a direct result of the natural increase of the animals. Initially, this was looked upon with satisfaction as indicating the success of the experiment and with the very natural

attitude that every calf born was a potential asset.

The plains buffalo, in its natural state, was essentially a migratory animal, moving from summer to winter pastures. Its abundance was controlled by such climatic conditions as blizzards and abnormal snowfall, and by prairie fires, accidents, wolves, and the Indians.

Fenced and protected in their new home, the buffalo increased rapidly in numbers and serious signs of overgrazing appeared on the restricted range. They were seen eating browse and small twigs; palatable grasses were replaced by undesirable species; and even the small mammals on the range were reduced in numbers. The situation was further complicated by the inclusion of elk, deer, and moose in the same compound, with a consequent increased competition for food. The provision of winter food became especially important, and extensive supplementary farming operations had to be undertaken. This changed the whole character of the enterprise to that of stockraising. It must be pointed out, however, that the science of wildlife management, now a well-recognized branch of ecology, was then in its infancy, and that there was little precedent for the management of buffalo.

By the early 1920's, active steps were being taken by the Canadian Parks Branch to control the situation by commencing a systematic slaughter of surplus and undesirable animals. In addition, four shipments of animals - 6,673 yearlings, two-year, and three-year-olds - were released in the newly established Wood Buffalo Park in the Northwest Territories.

The following figures are significant as an indication of the spectacular increase in numbers. By March 1939, it was estimated that more than 27,000 animals had been disposed of by controlled reductions and movement to other areas, yet the buffalo population at Buffalo and Elk Island Parks still exceeded 4,000 head.

The second problem had to do with the health of the animals. Impoverishment of range naturally had its effect on their condition. The policy of preserving all animals implied an increasing surplus of old bulls and cows of lesser value for the propagation of the herd. The exhibition value of these overmature animals favoured their retention, although adherence to the principles of herd sanitation and management would have required their removal.

The buffalo were found to be infected with parasites, the most serious of which was a species of liver fluke. The buffalo, although of the same family as domestic cattle, appeared to be surprisingly free from most of their other diseases, except tuberculosis.

This disease had not been demonstrated in the Park buffalo until post-mortem examinations in 1923 disclosed its presence. The origin of this infection is unknown, although contact with infected cattle must be considered the most likely possibility. From the history of the herd it may be seen that it had its origin in three distinct sources, any of which might have been contaminated. Furthermore, in 1909 and 1914 an additional 87 animals were sent to the Park from the Banff National Park herd. Most of these animals, descended from those presented to

Canada in 1898 by Lord Strathcona, came originally from the same Stony Mountain stock as the animals acquired by Buffalo Jones and later incorporated in the Allard-Pablo holdings.

In most cases, the disease in the Wainwright animals appeared to reach a resting stage and to cause little mortality. It was more prevalent in the older members of the herd.

In order to reduce the incidence of tuberculosis, suspected animals were slaughtered under the supervision of the Health of Animals Branch, Department of Agriculture. It was a simple matter to maintain the protective standards introduced for commercial herds of cattle; and, as a consequence, infected carcasses, or parts thereof, were destroyed.

Elk and other animals present in the Park were not molested at first and their yearly increase eventually reached large proportions. Only in later years were these animals slaughtered, and the meat and hide relegated to the relief of needy Indians.

Despite continued efforts to settle the two major problems outlined, the results were not satisfactory. Although the incidence of tuberculosis at Buffalo Park had been reduced by the slaughter of most of the older animals, the disease was not eliminated. The results of the 1937 slaughter showed that 58% of the animals killed were tubercular. In 1938 this figure was 44%, a decrease due, to some extent, to the inclusion in the slaughter of a much larger number of younger animals. The increased numbers of elk constituted an additional danger that the incidence of liver flukes would mount.

Taking all these matters into consideration, and following an inspection by a qualified technical adviser, it finally was decided that the only effective course would be to kill off all the animals remaining in Buffalo Park. The Government's decision was based on a full analysis of reports by experienced officers, including Dr. Seymour Hadwen, Director of Pathology and Bacteriology in the Ontario Research Foundation, who had been engaged in an advisory capacity by the Parks Bureau since 1923. Buffalo National Park was subsequently abolished by Act of Parliament in 1947.

In Canada the largest fenced herd now is at Elk Island Park near Edmonton, and numbers around 600 head. The characteristics of the original stock have been retained, and the animals generally are in a healthy condition. The park itself is readily accessible and has many attractions besides its buffalo. Small exhibition herds also are maintained at Riding Mountain, Prince Albert, Waterton Lake, and Banff National Parks; and specimens of buffalo can be seen in city parks and zoos at many places throughout Canada.

The large herd of hybrid wood plains buffalo at Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories is maintained without fencing under natural conditions. The Park supports about 12,000 animals and is known to contain, in a remote corner, a few of the original wood buffalo.

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